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La Revue HARIS parait 4 fois dans l'Année : Mars, Juin, Septembre et Décembre. Les publications de Juin, Septembre et de Décembre sont libres en termes de thématiques des articles et autres contributions et celle de Mars portera à chaque fois sur un thème précis qui est communiqué six mois à l'avance. La revue ne publie que des contributions inédites et de fonds sur tous les champs de recherches des Relations Internationales et des Études stratégiques. La doxa de la revue porte sur la vision africaine des Relations Internationales mais reste ouverte à toutes les visions et points de vue venant de tous les continents. Les normes de présentation des manuscrits sont celles du CAMES (à consulter sur le site de la revue http://www.revue-haris.org). Le manuscrit doit comprendre entre 5000 et 8000 mots et porter les noms et prénoms du ou des auteurs, le nom de l'Institution de rattachement, le mail, et une photo format identité du ou des auteurs.

Sommaire

AMERICAN EXPANSION IN A 21ST CENTURY EMERGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD: HEGEMONIC DECLINE OR STRATEGIC ADAPTATION?

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Résumé
Le XXIème siècle est marqué par une transformation géopolitique profonde : l'érosion relative de la puissance américaine et l'émergence d'un monde multipolaire. Cet article analyse la trajectoire de l'expansionnisme américain – hérité de la Guerre Froide et amplifié dans l'ère post-11 septembre – face à la montée en puissance d'acteurs étatiques et régionaux rivaux, notamment la Chine, la Russie, les BRISC, ainsi que l'influence d'entités multilatéraux non-étatiques. À travers une analyse détaillée de données et de faits, nous soutenons que les États-Unis ne subissent pas un déclin absolu, mais une redistribution du pouvoir mondial qui contraint leur capacité d'action unilatérale et les force à une réévaluation et une adaptation stratégiques complexes, oscillant entre résistance, accommodation et réaffirmation.

Mots clés : Expansion Americaine, BRICS, Puissance internationale, Hégémonie, Multipolarité

Abstract
The 21st century is marked by a profound geopolitical transformation: the relative erosion of American power and the emergence of a multipolar world. This article analyzes the trajectory of American expansionism inherited from the Cold War and amplified in the post-9/11 era in the face of the rise of rival state actors, notably China and Russia, as well as the influence of non-state entities. Through detailed data and fact analysis, we argue that the United States is not experiencing an absolute decline, but rather a redistribution of global power that constrains its capacity for unilateral action and forces it into complex strategic reassessment and adaptation, oscillating between resistance, accommodation, and reassertion.

Keywords: American Expansion, BRICS, Global Powers, Hegemony, Multipolarity

INTRODUCTION

The “unipolar moment” that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed to consecrate the United States as the undisputed hegemonic power. This period was characterized by an unprecedented expansion of American influence, both militarily (interventions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan) (J. Nergelius, 2004 and economically (neoliberal globalization) and normatively (promotion of democracy and human rights) (Gibbs, 2009).

However, the 21st century has gradually revealed the limits of this expansion. Costly and protracted wars in the Middle East, the 2008 financial crisis, and above all, the systemic rise of China and the revanchist resurgence of Russia appear as emerging challenges for the US. More importantly the development of the BRICS has cracked the foundations of the Washington-centered international order.

Based on an analysis of the scholarly debate, the central question of U.S. expansion in the 21st century whether it signifies Hegemonic Decline or Strategic Adaptation—does not have a definitive answer. Instead, scholars are engaged in a robust debate across three primary perspectives: one diagnosing absolute decline, another advocating for strategic retrenchment, and a third arguing for the renewal of U.S. primacy through adaptation.

The "Declinist" Perspective defends the Unipolarity's Inevitable End arguing that the post-Cold War" unipolar moment" is over. They identify several structural drivers. The Rise of Peer Competitors: China's economic and military expansion, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, is identified as the most significant challenge, directly contesting U.S. influence in Asia and beyond. Russia's actions in Crimea and Syria and more recently in Ukraine demonstrate a deliberate effort to undermine the Western-led order.

The Multipolar Momentum: It's not just about China and Russia. The growing economic weight and political aspirations of India, Brazil, Indonesia, and others (the BRICS) are creating multiple centers of power, making a return to a single pole of influence impossible (A. Dhanuraj *et al*, 2025). The "Post-American" Global South: Scholars note that many developing nations are actively welcoming a multipolar order, seeing it as an emancipation from Western dominance. This shift complicates traditional U.S. influence, as these states practice "omni-balancing" engaging with the U.S., China, and Russia simultaneously to maximize their own autonomy.

The "Adaptationist" Perspective: Recalibrating Grand Strategy. This group contends that U.S. policy must evolve not because of absolute decline, but due to a mismatch between its ends and means. They highlight a domestic "strategic insolvency," where public support for costly, open-ended global engagements has waned following the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This creates a "Lippmann Gap," where commitments outstrip available power and political will. A more restrained strategy rooted in realist theory. It suggests the U.S. should withdraw its forward-deployed troops and act as an external balancer, intervening only to prevent a single power from dominating a key region like Europe or Asia. Proponents argue this reduces costs and risk.

The "Primacist" or "Renewal" Perspective strongly contest a Multipolar Future, challenging thus the inevitability of multipolarity and advocates for policies to renew and sustain U.S. leadership.

These scholars caution against linear projections of decline, noting that past predictions of U.S. downfall have been wrong. They argue that while U.S. relative share of global GDP has decreased, its absolute power and unique assets—like its alliance network, demographic vitality, and capacity for innovation—remain formidable. These scholars point to significant vulnerabilities in rival states, such as China's demographic decline and economic bottlenecks, Russia's over-reliance on hydrocarbons, and Europe's political fragmentation.

A core argument is that accepting the narrative of inevitable decline can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, leading to premature retrenchment and the abdication of U.S. leadership that still underpins global stability (M. Kürşad *et al*, 2023, p. 411).

The debate leaves several critical questions unresolved, which define the current research frontier: The Future of Alliances: Will U.S. allies permanently hedge their bets? Concepts like European "strategic autonomy" and Southeast Asian "omni-balancing" suggest alliances may become more transactional. Scholars debate whether the emerging system will be bipolar (U.S. vs. China), tripolar, or a more diffuse "lopsided multipolarity" with the U.S. as first among equals.

This has major implications for stability, as theorists are divided on whether multipolar or bipolar systems are more prone to conflict. Ultimately, U.S. strategy depends on domestic political will and resource allocation. The persistent gap between global ambitions and domestic willingness to fund them is a central constraint identified across the literature.

This contribution aims to examine the dialectic between the American expansionist legacy and the unstoppable emergence of a multipolar world. How has the hyperpower of the 1990s and 2000s been challenged?

What strategies are the United States adopting to navigate this new geopolitical environment? We posit that the American response is multidimensional: it combines a determined resistance to the rise of China, a strategic confrontation with Russia, and the BRICS as well as a readjustment of its alliances, while being constrained by domestic challenges and the need for cooperation on transnational issues.

1. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF POST-COLD WAR U.S. EXPANSIONIST STRATEGY

This part examines the complex trajectory of American hegemony and expansionism since the Cold War's end, analyzing how structural conditions, domestic politics, strategic calculations, and external challenges have influenced Washington's approach to global leadership.

1.1. Theoretical Perspectives of US Hegemony

The conclusion of the Cold War in 1991 created an unprecedented geopolitical landscape characterized by American primacy across multiple domains—military, economic, political, and cultural. With the Soviet Union's dissolution, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower, possessing unparalleled capabilities to shape international affairs according to its interests and values.

The evidence reveals a persistent oscillation between multilateral engagement and unilateral assertion, with a notable trend toward the latter despite America's central role in constructing the post-World War II international order. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for comprehending contemporary

international relations and anticipating future global power shifts.

Realist scholars provide compelling explanations for U.S. behavior in the post-Cold War era, emphasizing structural incentives and power maximization. John Mearsheimer's offensive realism (2001, pp. 49-50) posits that in an anarchic international system, great powers inherently seek to maximize their power and pursue regional hegemony to ensure survival.

This relentless competition for power is driven by the lack of a global authority, making each state uncertain of others' intentions and forcing them into a "self-help" system where accumulating power is the only way to guarantee security. Mearsheimer argues that global hegemony is unlikely due to the difficulty of projecting power across oceans, making regional dominance the more realistic and achievable goal.

This theory implies that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no overarching government to enforce rules or protect states, that the primary goal of every state is to ensure its own survival, that States can never be completely certain of other states' intentions, which can change from benign to hostile, and to ensure survival in a dangerous world, great powers must seek to maximize their power relative to other states, while global hegemony is the ultimate goal for security, it's not feasible.

Therefore, great powers focus on achieving dominance in their own region. This relentless pursuit of power and security creates a cycle of conflict, rivalry, and insecurity among great powers (S. Glenn, 2002, p. 151). From this perspective, U.S. unilateralism represents a rational strategy to prevent the emergence of peer competitors and maintain its preeminent position.

Mearsheimer argues that states can never be certain of others' intentions and therefore must assume the worst, leading to constant security competition. Stephen Walt extends this analysis, suggesting that reduced structural constraints after the Cold War created permissive conditions for U.S. unilateral action, though he advocates for offshore balancing as a more sustainable approach than direct interventionism.

Defensive realism, associated with Kenneth Waltz (1979; 1993), offers a nuanced alternative, suggesting that while states primarily seek security rather than power per se, the absence of balancing constraints following the Soviet collapse enabled more expansive U.S. foreign policy ambitions. The evidence suggests that U.S. policymakers internalized aspects of both realist perspectives—employing unilateral force when deemed necessary while continuing engagement in multilateral institutions judged to serve American interests.

Following the classical realist's theory that "nations expand their political interests abroad when their relative power increases" (F. Zakaria, 1992, p. 19), J. Mearsheimer (2001) argues that the United States has so far succeeded to maintain the status quo power thanks to its strategy of deploying a network of military bases all around Europe and Asia.

> Great powers, I argue, are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals, with hegemony as their final goal. This perspective does not allow for status quo powers, except for the unusual state that achieves preponderance. Instead, the system is populated with great powers that have revisionist intentions at their core.' This chapter

> presents a theory that explains this competition for power. Specifically, I attempt to show that there is a compelling logic behind my claim that great powers seek to maximize their share of world power. I do not, however, test offensive realism against the historical record in this chapter. That important task is reserved for later chapters (J. Mearsheimer, 2001, 29)

Indeed, "The US has kept troops in Europe and Asia and this has postponed the unfolding of" (P. Toft, 2005, p. 397). Classical realists (such as Thucydides, E.H. Carr, Arnold Wolfers, and Hans Morgenthau) and offensive realists and more specifically John Measheiner share the assumption that states seek to maximize power – that states are relentless seekers of power and influence. According to John Measheiner:

> [the] explanation for why great powers vie with each other for power and strive for hegemony is derived from five assumptions about the international system. None of these assumptions alone mandates that states behave competitively. Taken together, however, they depict a world in which states have considerable reason to think and sometimes behave aggressively. In particular, the system encourages states to look for opportunities to maximize their power vis-A-vis other states (Mearsheimer, 2001, 29).

Liberal institutionalism presents a different interpretation, emphasizing America's pivotal role in creating and sustaining the post-war liberal international order. From this vantage point, U.S. leadership—even when exercised unilaterally at times—has provided public goods such as security guarantees, economic openness, and institutional frameworks that benefit all participating states. Scholars like Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry (2018) have argued that the liberal order's resilience stems from its rule-based character, which restrains the exercise of raw power and encourages voluntary participation.

However, as Michael Byers and others have documented, the United States has frequently exempted itself from these same rules when perceived to conflict with core national interests, producing significant tension between hegemonic authority and institutional legitimacy.

Critical scholarship examines how U.S. hegemony operates beyond coercive power, emphasizing its ideological and normative dimensions. Drawing from Gramscian theory (1992), these approaches highlight America's success in promoting its political and economic model as universally desirable, thereby generating consent rather than relying solely on coercion.

This perspective helps explain the soft power dimension of U.S. hegemony and how unilateral actions have sometimes undermined this foundation. As one analysis notes, the U.S. has struggled to reconcile its exceptionalist identity—the belief that America embodies a unique moral standing—with the compromises required by multilateral cooperation.

1.2. Historical Evolution of Post-Cold War U.S. Strategy

The American strategy of containing communism, through its various doctrines and theories, was all the more successful because Washington managed to destabilize and dismantle the Soviet empire.

The disappearance of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which materialized with the fall of the infamous Berlin Wall, paved the way for undeniable American hegemony. The United States now became the sole superpower, imposing its will on the world.

> With the implosion of the Soviet Union and its empire, both external and internal, the United States triumphed, now the sole superpower in the world. This triumph was, in a certain way, that of a strategy – or strategies – and the means employed: the USSR was successively encircled by containment, drawn by détente into an increasingly dense network of international relations, and brought to its knees by American technological superiority; it was defeated without war being fought, a victory without military engagement, an innumerable success of nuclear deterrence (M. Smouth, 1998, p. 357).

The immediate post-Cold War period witnessed America's grappling with its unprecedented hegemonic position and the manifestations of U.S. hegemony after the Cold War are multifaceted, reflecting its unique position as a sole superpower. The first Bush administration cautiously referenced a "new world order" characterized by great power cooperation and renewed United Nations leadership.

During his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, President George H.W. Bush declared “that this will be a decisive decade in the history of liberty, that we've been called to a unique role in human events. Rarely has the world faced a choice more clear or consequential” (G. Bush, 2022, p. 3).

This initial multilateralist orientation, however, soon confronted the realities of unipolarity. The Clinton administration embraced democratic enlargement and economic globalization as pillars of its strategy, combining unilateral military actions (1998 airstrikes in Iraq and Sudan) with multilateral interventions (NATO operations in Bosnia and Kosovo). This period as consolidating a shift from America's traditional focus on exemplary leadership reflecting the city upon a hill American ideology.

Whether in the political, economic, or military spheres, the United States has played a leading international role since World War II. And When America emerged as the world's sole superpower after the Cold War the American geopolitical Scholar Francis Fukuyama theorized that the end of the Cold War marked the end of history, since wars and power struggles between great powers have always been the driving force of history (F. Fukuyama, 1989, p. 5). Now that only one superpower remains, facing no risk of confrontation or resistance from any adversary or competitor, historical events are over, and history itself is finished.

Thus, this American sentiment became the solid foundation that would underpin the foreign policy of the United States, which remained confident in its exclusive international role. It is for this reason, moreover, that the Republican President George W. Bush, more categorically, declared in his first inaugural address on August 28, 2000: “Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model for the world” (A. Ong, *et al.,* 1997, p. 4).

Thus the US power projected through aggressive unilateral policies, an unparalleled global military presence, and the leveraging of its

economic and cultural influence, all while facing evolving challenges to its dominance. The most visible manifestation of U.S. hegemony is its global military footprint and willingness to use force.

The United States maintains a historically unique network of military bases abroad. According to the Pentagon, there are approximately 800 U.S. bases in more than 70 foreign countries.

This includes 174 bases in Germany, 113 in Japan, and 83 in South Korea, creating a global infrastructure that allows for power projection and rapid intervention worldwide. Increased Military Intervention: The post-Cold War "unipolar moment" saw a significant rise in U.S. military interventions.

Table: Key U.S. Military Interventions in the Post-Cold War Era

Conflict/intervention	Year	Authorization	Stated Justification
Gulf War	1991	UN Security Council	Roll back Iraqi invasion of Kuwait
Somalia	1992	UN Security Council	Humanitarian relief
Kosovo	1999	NATO	Prevent ethnic cleansing
Afghanistan	2001	Self-defense/NATO	Prevent WMD proliferation
Iraq	2003	Unilateral/Coalition	Response to 9/11 attacks

This suggests that in the absence of a peer competitor like the Soviet Union, the U.S. was more willing to use military force to manage international affairs. With the Cold War's constraints removed, U.S. foreign policy exhibited a strong unilateralist tendency, often acting outside multilateral institutions. The "Rogue Superpower" Trajectory: Scholar Michael Beckley argues that post-Cold War U.S. strategy evolved into a form of aggressive unilateralism, becoming a "rogue superpower" that is "neither internationalist nor isolationist but aggressive, powerful, and increasingly out for itself" . This is characterized by raising tariffs, slashing foreign aid, snubbing allies, and proposing to seize foreign territory.

Selective Multilateralism and Challenging Institutions: The U.S. has often acted alone or with "coalitions of the willing" when it deemed multilateral bodies too slow or opposed to its interests. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, launched despite the lack of explicit UN Security Council authorization, is a prime example of this unilateral impulse. Furthermore, the U.S. has shown a willingness to withdraw from international agreements and institutions, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change and the World Health Organization, when perceived as conflicting with national interests.

U.S. hegemony is also sustained through its central role in the global economy and the projection of its cultural influence. Structural Economic Power: The United States possesses formidable economic tools for coercion. The U.S. dollar's role as the world's primary reserve currency is a key source of power; nearly 90% of international financial transactions are conducted in dollars, funneled through U.S.-linked banks, giving Washington the ability to impose crippling sanctions. Its large consumer market and dominance in high-tech industries provide additional leverage.

The Evolution of Cultural Diplomacy: While the massive state-sponsored cultural diplomacy efforts of the Cold War diminished after 1991, the U.S. continued to project

influence through its cultural and ideological appeal.

However, this "soft power" has recently been confronted with some internal challenges. Indeed, internal political and economic factors increasingly limit U.S. unilateral ambitions. The rising national debt, now exceeding $38 trillion, creates long-term vulnerabilities, with debt servicing costs surpassing defense spending. As Richard Haass warns, this fiscal pressure will likely constrain future defense budgets, forcing difficult trade-offs between domestic priorities and global commitments.

Additionally, public war-weariness following prolonged conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq has created a cautionary political environment regarding military intervention. The Vietnam syndrome of the late 20th century has been supplanted by an "Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome" that colors public assessment of overseas ventures.

These domestic realities interact with international constraints to create a more challenging environment for hegemonic management than existed during the immediate post-Cold War unipolar moment.

2. THE EMERGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD AND STRATEGIC US RESPONSE AND ADAPTATION

The US expansion in the 21st century is no longer that of the post-Cold War unipolar hegemony. The landscape has become multipolar, characterized by increased competition from emerging powers and more complex alliances. However, the United States is demonstrating remarkable strategic adaptation, leveraging its enduring strengths (military, economic, and diplomatic) to maintain significant global influence.

The question, therefore, is less whether the United States is declining, but rather how it is negotiating its role in a world where its supremacy is no longer absolute.

2. 1. The Emerging Multipolar World

Today the United States faces major geopolitical challenges questioning thus its superpower position. The most threatening one among these is the emergence of new international powers, leading to significant transformations in international relations.

Today, the increasingly frequent emergence of powers in Asia, coupled with significant developments of new transnational as well as regional and international alliances from Asia to Latin American and African have marked a new era of competitions among powers. Indeed, a new world, characterized by the emergence of multiple poles and multilateralism, is tending to replace the absolute American monopolarity that has dominated international relations since the end of the Cold War.

It is this new situation of international interdependence that Zbigniew Brezinski explains in his book Strategic Vision. The world is now interactive and interdependent. It is also, the first time, a world in which the problems of human survival have begun to overshadow more traditional international conflicts.

Unfortunately, the major powers have yet to undertake globally cooperative responses to the new and increasingly grave challenges to human wellbeing— environmental, climatic, socioeconomic, nutritional, or demographic. And without basic geopolitical stability, any effort to achieve the necessary global cooperation will falter.

Indeed, the changing distribution of global power and the new phenomenon of massive political awakening intensify, each in its own way, the volatility of contemporary international relations. As China's influence grows and as other emerging powers—Russia or India or Brazil for example— compete with each other for resources, security, and economic advantage, the potential for miscalculation and conflict increases.

Accordingly, the United States must seek to shape a broader geopolitical foundation for constructive cooperation in the global arena, while accommodating the rising aspirations of an increasingly restless global population.

But it is China, above all, that has managed to rise to a central position in terms of economic and international diplomatic leadership. According to Brzezinski, China's development momentum has truly taken off since Deng Xiaoping implemented the policy of liberalizing the Chinese market.

This, he argues, opened the country's doors to the world and irreversibly set it on the path to growth. He adds that this economic emergence is a strong signal of a possible decline of Western powers in favor of Asian powers. "Its rise signals both the end of the West's singular preeminence and the concomitant shift eastward of the global Center of Gravity*"* (Z. Brzezinski, 2012, p. 38).

The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed China to focus on more dynamic national development strategies than ever before, making rational use of its resources, instead of dwelling on a Cold War that only brought it trouble. As a result, the country was able to build a multitude of essential infrastructures for effective and efficient economic growth (A. Ong, *et al.,* 1997, p. 4).

In his book, Brzezinski develops, as the title clearly indicates, a comprehensive forward-looking and geopolitical vision of global evolution, focusing primarily on the role of the United States. He seeks to answer several key questions for understanding geopolitical developments up to 2025. In his view, international leadership is gradually shifting from West to East.

He then analyzes the corollaries and consequences of this shift. According to this forward-looking vision, America's decline is almost imminent, as evidenced by several signs both internal and external to the United States. Brzezinski further emphasizes that the United States missed a crucial opportunity to maintain its international role in the aftermath of the Cold War.

He doesn't stop there. He suggests geopolitical and geostrategic reorientations that would allow his country to sustainably maintain its superpower status. However, this implies a broader American-European alliance, even including Russia and Turkey, as well as the promotion of Sino-American cooperation, all with a view to maintaining its international hegemony.

From that moment on, they were without rival, and some researchers even spoke of the end of history, believing that no major event capable of disrupting the established international order could occur in the future. The 21st century seemed to be an exclusively American century.

President Bill Clinton expressed this American hope very well during his inaugural address on January 20, 1997: "At this last presidential inauguration of 20th century, let us lift our eyes toward the challenges that await us in the next century […] At the dawn of the 21st century […] America stands alone as the world's indispensable nation" (Presidential

Documents Federal Register, 1997, p. 3443).

India has a rapidly growing population and an increasingly dynamic economy, even becoming a potential rival to China in Asia. Indeed, India harbors greater international ambitions, seeking to expand its influence. Meanwhile, Japan represents the Pacific power, an ally of the United States. Brzezinski compares the situation in Asia to that which prevailed in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century and which led to the First World War.

He argues that if the United States were to lose its superpower status to China, Asia would likely descend into war, especially since these three Asian powers—two regional (India and Japan) and one international—are all rivals. Early 20th-century Europe was also characterized by the existence of two rival powers: the continental power, Germany, and the maritime power, Great Britain and France.

In the West, India is often described as a rapidly growing emerging power that could one day join the ranks of the world's major nations. This assessment is largely based on the economic dynamism the country has enjoyed for several years now. Between 2005 and 2008, the Indian economy recorded average annual growth of 9%. It also recovered from the economic and financial crisis earlier than many other Western countries.

According to forecasts by the International Monetary Fund, the Indian economy's growth rate will reach 8% between 2010 and 2012. With a population of over one billion (1.2 billion in 2010), India offers one of the most dynamic and powerful markets in the world. The country's economic development has been accompanied by strong growth in its middle class, which now represents a quarter of its total population.

Its rapidly growing middle class, estimated at between 30 and 300 million individuals, is considered a vast consumer market for goods from Western countries. Its status as a nuclear power has also contributed to its growing influence in global politics. The extremely rapid growth of its economy, combined with its rapidly increasing population, has created a growing need for energy, primarily oil. Its dependence on foreign oil is estimated to be close to that of the United States.

South Korea, through its president, even went so far as to affirm its determination to secure a place in the G20 before 2010. In addition, the republics of Taiwan and Singapore then set about building absolutely dynamic economies which have ranked them among the new emerging countries since the 1990s and which have become references for many countries of the world.

> During this period, the total value of China's foreign trade increased from US $620.7 billion to US $2173.8.0 billion, with its exports increasing from US $325.6 billion to US $1218.0 billion and imports increasing from US $295.1 billion to US$955.8 . . . China has become the third largest trading nation in the world, after the United States and Germany (C. Chen, 2009, p. 20)

Given the extremely rapid growth of its energy needs, the country is increasingly dependent on energy imports. Its oil, which currently represents a quarter of its primary energy consumption, already comes from abroad to the tune of 70%, primarily from the Persian Gulf. By 2030, this imported share is estimated to reach around 90%. Central Asia would constitute an

alternative energy source of extraordinary importance for India.

India imports 70% of its oil needs from abroad, mainly from the Persian Gulf. This dependence is estimated to reach 90% by 2030. Thus, like other international powers such as China and the United States, India is already embarking on the search for an alternative supply. At a time when many researchers, such as Eth Zurich, are considering Central Asia as the main alternative to supply India with sufficient oil, an important hypothesis seems to be African oil, which is increasingly coveted by the world's major powers. China's rapid rise to prominence as a decisive power in the global system coincided with a growing American debt, particularly after 2000. This situation led many researchers to question the sustainability of American power and the vitality of the American economy.

September 11, 2001, provided the Bush administration with an opportunity to launch a long-planned military intervention in Iraq, beginning in 2003. Based on George Bush's "global war on terror" theory, this intervention significantly fueled anti-American sentiment, even among Washington's traditional allies. Alongside this worrying phenomenon, the 2008-2009 financial crisis exacerbated the situation, jeopardizing American leadership, especially in economic matters.

> Thus, the world became more aware that America—despite being the hope of many who have the personal drive and ambition to become part of the "American dream"— is beset by serious operational challenges: a massive and growing national debt, widening social inequality, a cornucopian culture that worships materialism, a financial system given to greedy speculation, and a polarized political system (Z. Brzezinski, , 2012, p. 130 – 145).

Some geopolitical experts argue that China is emerging as the true potential successor to America as the world's leading power. China has embarked on a more strategic expansionist path than ever before, particularly through developing countries like those in Africa. The strength of China's strategy lies primarily in its cautious approach. The Chinese accept the international system as imposed by Western powers. They simply seek to expand their markets through growth in developing countries.

China does not claim to impose an ideology inspired by a divine mission, as Western powers have historically done, much less lecture these countries on morality or democracy, considering them equal partners. This expansionist, yet courteous and typically Chinese approach has allowed China to gain the trust of its partner countries, thus securing a major geostrategic position on the international stage.

This cautious strategy advocated by the Chinese authorities certainly stems from the teachings of the strategist General Sun Tzu, who emphasized that in combat, the best strategy for a fighter is to retreat, wait for the adversary to fall into a trap before attacking, thus making their capitulation irreversible. Chinese strategists seem to be embracing this theory in their current expansionist policy.

As a matter of fact, this reality is more seen in Africa, which is now the scene of fierce competition among all the major powers, especially since China appears to have outmaneuvered the United States in the conquest of African markets. In reality, China waited until America was more focused on Asia, and primarily the

Middle East, before forcefully invading African markets. According to a study by McKinsey, today, China has more than 10000 major companies established on the African continent, with investments reaching US$250 billion Nin 2025, and more aggressive Chinese expansion throughout Africa could see these firms double in near future (I. Sun, 2017, p.10).

However, China undeniably recognizes American leadership and the interdependence that exists between economies in the global system. C also understands that the decline of the American economy cannot fail to affect its own. Beijing has a prudent strategy focused on long-term objectives and ambitions.

China continues searching to increase its investments worldwide, particularly in Latin America and developing countries in Africa, without presuming to lecture these countries. Its sole interest lies in further expanding its markets. According to Zack Cooper (2025, p. 38) "gone are the days when President John F. Kennedy could promise that the United States would "bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty."

More seriously, the emergence of the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—at the end of the 20th century equally marked a new turning point in the world system and posed a serious threat to American hegemony (M. Ünay, 2013, p. 84-85).

Indeed, "since the mid-2000s, BRICS countries have transformed themselves into a powerful political and diplomatic platform influential in global affairs and have sought to reshape global governance toward a more balanced and multipolar configuration" (M. Kürşad *et al.*, 2023, p. 420).

> There was an explicit call at the BRICS summit in 2019 for a transformation of the international trade/finance architecture and structures of global governance toward a just, equitable, and representative multipolar international order; the goal was increasing the voting power and representation of emerging economies in global governance platforms such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN. Similarly, during the ninthsummit in Xiamen in 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin and other BRICS leaders attacked the US Dollar's dominance as an international currency (M. Kürşad *et al.*, 2023, p. 420).

During that strategic meeting, Putin said: "We are ready to work together with our partners to promote international financial regulation reforms and to overcome the excessive domination of the limited number of reserve currencies" (M. Nuruzzaman, 2020, p. 8). Along with contesting Western hegemony from within the existing institutions, BRICS countries have carried out a notable degree of institutionalization to curb US dominance over global economic and financial systems.

> The New Development Bank (NDB) was created to finance infrastructure projects in BRICS and other emerging economies, while the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CSA), a countermeasure to the IMF, was founded to provide protection againstglobal liquidity and short-term balance of payment pressures (M. Nuruzzaman, 2020, p. 8)

The changes in geopolitical considerations that have taken place due to the BRICS (A. Wso *et al.*, 2025). over the last two decades not only reveal the strong desire of emerging countries to play a larger role in world politics, but they also signal the making of a new and multipolar world order in which traditional power centers no longer have a monopoly of patronage.

This context of the US hegemonic decline has been increasingly felt throughout the world as BRICS countries, primarily Russia and China, and to a lesser extent India and Brazil have continued extending its sphere of influence in economic, political, and security terms, positioning themselves as alternative partners or patrons, at the expense of key Western interests.

Accounting for 41 per cent of the world population and more than 25 per cent of global GDP, BRICS has become not only the main engine of world economic growth but also the main trading partner and investor for the countries in Latin America (Y. Lissovolik, 2024, p. 10) , the Middle East and Africa. Thanks to their rising economic and political power, challenging the Western-dominated economic order in the region.

In the current geopolitical scenario with the trade wars between the USA and China, and the uncertainty of the US President's actions, the BRICS nations need to re-strategize their economic policies. The bloc will need to push forward for fair and open global trade in reaction to US protectionism. BRICS nations will likely emerge as a platform to shape alternative trade alliances, positioning itself as a counterweight to the US-dominated structures. Nations in the Global South want to move towards a multipolar world, and the BRICS nations provide the perfect platform for these nations to come together and advocate for their agenda.

Increasing engagement in the multilateral forums like the G20, WTO and the UN is also on the agenda for the BRICS nations to push forward a path that will support a multipolar world. Engagement in these forums is the key for the Global South nations to voice their concerns in a changing global scenario (D. Dhanuraj, 2025, p. 22). Yet, this search of the redistribution of global power that presents the most significant challenge to continued U.S. hegemony is confronted with strong limitations and strategic US adaptation.

2.2. Limitations of the Challenging Powers and Strategic US Adaptation

It is true that BRICS, as a newly formed global power bloc, seeks to democratically reform the US-led liberal world order by increasing their voting power in the UN and Bretton Woods institutions and thereby reduce the dominance of the United States over global political, economic, and financial systems. However, BRICS' capacity to overhaul the US-led liberal world order is severely limited by the group's internal composition, political and ideological heterogeneity, the lack of general agreement on foreign policy objectives, and more importantly its inability to provide global public goods such as security, a stable currency, a functioning global trading system, and any coordination of overall global governance; all of these are necessary prerequisites for the development of an alternative international order.

The U.S. response has combined elements of engagement and containment, exemplified by the "pivot to Asia" and competitive frameworks like the Indo-Pacific Strategy. A vigorous debate is underway on how to adapt its grand strategy, which can be categorized into several key approaches. Some scholars suggest that the US adopt a realistic recalibration.

This school of thought advocates for a pragmatic adjustment of U.S. ambitions to match its resources and the new geopolitical reality and acknowledge multipolarity as inevitable (S. Ünay, 2013, p. 84-85). Scholars like Zack Cooper argue that Washington must proactively embrace a multipolar world, as the American public is no longer willing to dedicate the resources required for global primacy, creating a "Lippmann Gap" where commitments exceed available power.

Other scholars recommend the pursuit of "first among equals" strategy. Emma Ashford (2025) proposes a strategy of "pragmatic realism" where the U.S. would act as a "first among equals." This involves pursuing narrower national interests, cultivating the capabilities of friendly states to share burdens, and emphasizing diplomatic flexibility over rigid alliances.

Promote Allied Autonomy: Instead of tightly directing alliances, the U.S. should encourage allies to develop their own independent capacities to face a multipolar environment. This may lead to occasional policy disagreements, but it builds a more resilient and adaptable network of partnerships.

Another approach, which has been evident in recent administrations, is to accept a more competitive world while seeking to manage it by reinforcing existing frameworks. To counter the influence of other great powers, the U.S. must strengthen its alliance network, such as through enhanced military cooperation in Asia (Japan, South Korea, Australia) and the revitalization of NATO.

Compete While Managing Risk: The U.S. must balance intense competition in areas like technology and economics with recognition of shared existential threats (climate change, nuclear proliferation).

This creates boundaries for rivalry, fostering a "precarious balance" where limited cooperation is a necessity to avoid catastrophe. The inconsistency in U.S. foreign policy between administrations—such as the reversal on the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA)—undercuts American credibility and trust among both allies and adversaries. A more consistent, long-term bipartisan strategy is needed for effective competition.

Enduring ideological tension is another possible response to current hegemonic challenges. The U.S. is an ideological nation, built on a creed of democracy and freedom, yet it is also a state that must operate in an amoral international system. This creates a perpetual oscillation between the desire to act as a "City on the Hill" and the need to make pragmatic compromises with unsavory regimes to protect national interests. Navigating this tension will continue to be a central challenge in a multipolar world where the U.S. must engage with diverse non-democratic powers.

The Trump administration's "America First" doctrine also represents a fundamental reorientation of U.S. foreign policy that directly challenged the post-Cold War international order. This philosophical and operational shift occurred precisely as the BRICS coalition (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) was maturing from an economic concept into an increasingly coordinated geopolitical bloc with ambitions to reshape global governance institutions. Indeed, the Trump administration deployed a range of targeted protectionist measures that disproportionately affected BRICS economies, particularly China.

These policies were justified as correcting unfair trade practices but functioned as geoeconomic instruments to counter BRICS'

growing influence. The most significant was the U.S.-China trade war, characterized by reciprocal tariffs on over $370 billion worth of Chinese goods that sought to reduce the U.S. trade deficit and address technology transfer concerns.

This conflict represented the doctrine's most direct application against a BRICS member, with Trump famously asserting that trade wars are good and easy to win based on his belief in American escalation dominance. He threatened the BRICS with specific measures, citing national security concerns about industrial base erosion.

> President Donald J. Trump repeatedly said that he would impose 100 percent tariffs on countries that seek to reduce the US dollar's dominant role in global finance. But if he carried through with such threats, the action would result in slower growth and higher inflation than otherwise in the US and most of the targeted economies, according to our analysis (W. Mckibbin, 2025, p. 3)

These tariffs while global in scope particularly affects BRICS commodity exporters. Additionally, the administration renegotiated major trade agreements, replacing NAFTA with USMCA and withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership—an agreement initially designed partly to counterbalance China's regional influence.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals U.S. hegemony and unilateralism as dynamic, contested processes rather than static conditions. The unipolar moment has evolved into a more complex international environment characterized by persistent American primacy alongside emerging constraints and challenges. The post-Cold War period began with optimistic visions of a "new world order" based on great power cooperation but quickly devolved into more unilateral tendencies as structural opportunities outweighed institutional constraints.

The 21st century has witnessed both the apex of American unilateralism after 9/11 and its subsequent moderation in response to material and normative pushback.
The future trajectory likely points toward continued hegemonic management but through more nuanced approaches that blend unilateral reserves with multilateral cooperation. The challenges of rising powers, institutional constraints, and domestic limitations will necessitate greater strategic selectivity.

As Stephen Walt advises, an offshore balancing strategy that conserves resources and leverages regional partners may offer the most sustainable approach. However, the persistent influence of American exceptionalism and ongoing security competitions suggest that unilateral tendencies will resurface periodically, particularly regarding core interests like technological dominance, financial sovereignty, and strategic deterrence.

What emerges from this analysis is neither inevitable decline nor perpetual primacy but rather an ongoing negotiation between America's power, principles, and the changing global distribution of capabilities.

The tension between "promised land" and "crusader state" mentalities will continue to shape this trajectory,

ensuring that the debate over America's global role remains central to both domestic politics and international relations. Understanding this complex interplay provides crucial insights not only for scholars but for policymakers navigating an increasingly contested international order.

The emergence of a multipolar world, characterized by the rise of multiple power centers challenging the post-Cold War dominance of the United States, represents a fundamental shift in global affairs.

The question of whether U.S. expansion in a multipolar world constitutes hegemonic decline or strategic adaptation does not have a binary answer. The evience suggests a dual reality. On one hand, the United States is not an empire in absolute, terminal decline; it retains unparalleled military capabilities, a dynamic (if strained) economy, and a network of alliances. Its actions can be interpreted as a rational, if brutal, adaptation to a more competitive environment, shifting from guarantor to negotiator.

However, the manner of this adaptation, particularly the embrace of a volatile and transactional "America First" doctrine, actively accelerates the very decline it seeks to reverse. The core challenge is therefore not a simple lack of power, but a profound crisis of domestic political will and institutional reliability. The future of U.S. global influence will depend less on its ability to out-compete China and the BRICS more on its capacity to overcome internal polarization, rebuild a sustainable domestic consensus on its international role, and restore its reputation as a predictable partner.

The emergence of a stable multipolar order will hinge on how the U.S. can navigate its own internal reformation while strategically engaging on the global sphere and confront the rising powers of the 21st century.

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